

Craft and the Creative Economy by Susan Luckman - Book review

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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Racz, I 2016, 'Craft and the Creative Economy by Susan Luckman - Book review' *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol 9, no. 3, pp. 371-373

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2016.1249097>

DOI 10.1080/17496772.2016.1249097

ISSN 1749-6772

ESSN 1749-6780

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The Journal of Modern Craft on 15th December 2016, available

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17496772.2016.1249097>

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Book review final

In *Craft and the Creative Economy* Susan Luckman explores the resurgence of craft making, and how digital advances like the selling site Etsy, which in 2013 sold more than US\$ 1.3 billion of merchandise, have made it possible for makers to earn a living and balance other life needs. This brings in issues concerned with the economics, making, gender and lifestyle of small and micro craft businesses, and what the handmade says about both the choices of makers and consumers. Although online sites presume a global economy, the book focuses on Australia, the United States and England.

This is an important and well-researched book that draws together information from many sources and fills gaps in knowledge. Some of the ground has been rehearsed before – as with the contested status of craft – but Luckman brings a particular viewpoint to these arguments that is less about whether something is art, design or craft, and instead focuses on the economic arguments, the place of making for individuals, the blurring between amateur and professional and the pragmatic economic strategies that craft makers have exploited.

The six chapters work through the resurgence of the contemporary craft market, how crafts is located within the creative industries, the handmade object, negotiating the work life balance, the public/private collapse in the online community, and finally the tensions inherent in home-based working.

Luckman builds on particular interests that she has developed over a number of previous publications, specifically the changing status of

‘women’s’ crafts, the importance of the digital as a means of remote working and the importance of the handmade as a stand against mass production. She analyses the attraction of making for a living, which include the ‘good life’, ethics, and flexibility of hours that can work around childcare. She outlines with clarity the growth of a ‘making and doing’ culture that is enabled by the exponential growth of online networks and craft fairs. She argues that this clustering of talent enables all to become more productive. She also considers the changes of patterns of consumption that have become politicized, driven by notions of ‘authenticity’, and a way of connoting individuality and self-expression. All these areas are considered with clarity, nuance and rigour.

As seen in previous publications, Luckman has a great knowledge of a range of cultural practices, including food markets, music and sports. This breadth is a strength for understanding the broader cultural industry, but is also a weakness in terms of articulating craft’s diverse practices. There are assumptions made about the type of craft that women are engaged with, and some generalisations about craft making. Luckman opens up debates about the overlaps between different types of tools, from lathes, kilns and hammers to laser cutters and 3D printers, and how these have impacted on what is considered ‘craft’. (xiii) She also discusses how respect for different genres of skills is one aspect of the idea of craft. However, this is not really followed through, and the economics of jewellery, blacksmithing and knitting are different. In some places, the sweeping term craft was used so that I was unclear as to whether it was sewing, ceramics or jam making that were being discussed. However, other of the economic arguments are well grounded, as

with the debates around high-end creative work and that which is bread and butter – jewellery and ceramics. (54-55.)

Luckman begins the book with how she learned crafts from her mother and grandmother, who were particularly skilled at knitting and sewing. This love of making and a clear understanding about the time, skill and sense of achievement involved in this permeate the book. There is an interesting debate about how these soft practices, associated with granny and the Women's Institute have gained an edginess and become political, hip and decidedly feminist, with practices such as yarn bombing. As Luckman writes, this politicization and protest has been an integral part of textile's history, but is frequently overlooked.

There is a useful overview of the residual ideas developed from the arts and crafts movement, but the argument concentrates on sewing and textile based practices, which are linked to female practices. This is a tricky area. Traditionally, as Luckman has written, sewing in its broadest sense was considered less high status because it was domestic and female. However, since the 1970s this has changed, and the genres have become much less gendered. There is a good debate about the engaged body, but types of materials and modes of making impact on the performance of making. A blacksmith will have a different relationship with material to a ceramicist, who will use different movements than a knitter.

Much attention is given to the importance of the handmade, and chapter 3 is devoted to the object itself. Here there is a really interesting debate about the perception of being local and ethical in buying online, directly from a maker, when in fact the transport of

this object may well involve many craft miles. While the perception of something that is handmade involves buying into a relationship with a person and process, Luckman queries this apparent reality, while also arguing about the proud history of craft's haptic engagement.

Luckman focuses on Etsy as the ebay of craft production, and has a useful grid of the full listing of 2013 Etsy featured shop blogs. She analyses this site well, and it is a running theme throughout the book. However, other types of online sites, like that of the Crafts Council (UK), which lists makers and illustrates their work, are not fully explored and compared. Etsy is a useful site, but is quite narrow. However, it should be said that Luckman draws on a large range of sites for other reasons, citing campaigns, lobbying, statistics and help given by different craft councils and their magazines.

This is an enjoyable read. The arguments are well made. There is nuance and a scholarly attention to detail. This is not a book about the history or theory of craft practices, but is a sound and pertinent book about how craft operates within the creative economy.